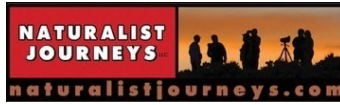


# Cape May: Fall Migration | October 8 - 14, 2024 | Trip Report | by Rick Weiman



With guide Rick Weiman and participants Diane, Ken, Wyatt, Cathie, Joe, Loretta and Jim



## **Tues., Oct. 8 Arrivals in Philadelphia and then on to Cape May, NJ**

Welcome to Cape May (by way of Philadelphia)! We had some early flights so Joe, Loretta, Jim and Cathie were picked up by Rick at 10:30AM and the group drove directly to Cape May. Wyatt, Diane & Ken were driving or ferrying directly to Cape May to meet the group later in the day. The early arriving group visited Sunset Beach for some fresh air under beautiful blue skies and then picked up a picnic lunch at the local WaWa and dined outdoors at the Cape May Point State Park; home of the famous Cape May Lighthouse and hawkwatch. In our short time there we saw 15 species of birds from the hawkwatch and on Bunker Pond, including 5 duck species, 2 Merlin, several Northern Harriers and Ospreys and our first Bald Eagle. After checking in to the Sea Crest Inn, our one stop beachside hotel for the week, we went back to the park later in the afternoon with the full group and saw many of the same birds. We added 17 more to the list including our first of many Peregrine Falcons and Brown Pelicans. One surprise was a male Eurasian Wigeon on one of the back ponds in the park with his head glowing a brilliant golden-brown color in the late afternoon sunlight.



After a rest at the hotel, we stopped at Sunset Liquors to stock up on wine and local beer for the week and for our 'welcome to Cape May' dinner at Sapore Italiano. The deliciously fresh seafood branzino special and homemade lasagna seemed to be the favorites. We then completed our initial species checklist in Rick's room and headed off to bed after a full but rewarding first day.

## **Wed., Oct. 9                      Beach Walk | Revolution Rail | Hawkwatch**

Most of the group met at 6:45 and walked across the street to the beach to enjoy the sunrise. We were rewarded with a flock of about 40 Black Skimmers just as the orange glow of the sunrise bathed the beach. We saw at least 5 Osprey fishing in the surf and compared several Lesser Black-backed Gulls to their larger Great Black-backed cousins through the scope. Joe had been scanning the ocean counting something and then announced 330 Royal Terns had passed by us in our half hour on the beach! The dunes were full of migrating Yellow-rumped Warblers as we walked back to the hotel - a theme that would continue throughout the week.

After a filling breakfast at Ocean View restaurant, we joined our guides at Revolution Rail for a rail bike ride into the salt marsh on the original (and now retired and repurposed) Reading Railroad train tracks. The group learned about the history of the Reading and Pennsylvania Railroad companies and their importance in establishing Cape May as the oldest seaside resort in the USA in the 1800's. After 2 miles, the tracks ended at the man-made canal where their company naturalist Jesse Amesbury went into detail about the fascinating history of Cape May during World War II, explaining that the canal was dug to connect the Atlantic Ocean with Delaware Bay to thwart German U-boats from sinking American vessels. Because the rail bikes require no steering, we, of course, birded while we pedaled and spotted or heard 33 species of birds during the journey. The rail bikes were then turned around on the tracks and we pedaled back. We stopped at The Nature Conservancy's Garrett Family Preserve for an hour-long nature walk around the flower-filled fields and salt marsh there, adding a calling Clapper Rail, Hairy Woodpecker, and American Goldfinch to our list.

A visit to the Cape May Bird Observatory (CMBO) Northwood Center was next, and we walked their pollinator garden adding Tufted Titmouse and White-breasted Nuthatch. Several of us shopped for CMBO hats and bird books in their nature store. Lunch was outdoors at the newly renovated Fish House at Sunset Beach where crab cakes, lobster rolls, and flounder sandwiches were on the menu. After lunch we all wanted to spend more time at the hawkwatch so we headed back to the state park, enjoying an active raptor flight which included our group seeing 17 Peregrine Falcons (the counter had 47 that day) and several Merlin and American Kestrel, completing



our falcon trifacta. At least 15 Osprey and many Sharp-shinned and Coopers Hawks passed over us, and Joe was fortunate enough to see the first Golden Eagle spotted at the hawkwatch this fall while the rest of us were in the bathrooms (there's a lesson in there somewhere). We then made a quick stop at the new trail system that connects to the state park along Sea Grove Ave. During our walk, we added more Northern Flickers and Yellow-rumped Warblers, a Brown Creeper, and an Eastern Phoebe. Next, it was on to the local Acme grocery store to shop for in-room breakfast items, as we had several early mornings coming up. After a break at the hotel, dinner was at Secondo Panico in North Cape May followed by our species checklist.

## **Thurs., Oct. 10                      Morning Flight | Wetlands Institute | Hereford Inlet**

Our first really early morning started with an in-room breakfast so we could depart for the Higbee Beach WMA at 6:30AM to be there at sunrise for the Morning Flight count, officially started by CMBO in 2003. We were successful in getting off on time and thus had the viewing platform all to ourselves to start. Many songbirds are nocturnal migrants but in certain coastal areas such as Cape May, thousands of songbirds make brief migratory flights just after sunrise following fall cold fronts. The birds follow the coast south and then as it wraps west around Cape May Point the open waters of Delaware Bay may make the birds pause a bit and instead of immediately crossing, fly northwest towards Higbee Beach.

Like other migration events in Cape May, songbird migration is weather dependent. On some days few birds are seen; on others, thousands may be counted. One of our October 2023 tours was present on a day when over 60,000 Yellow-rumped Warblers and 700+ Northern Flickers were counted. The expert seasonal counters are stationed up on a dike a few hundred yards from our viewing platform. They combine knowledge of flight calls with observations of shape, flight style, visible color patterns, and an understanding of migration patterns. Our group was aided by a CMBO naturalist and although it was not a record-breaking morning, we certainly experienced the wonders of migration as a multitude of Northern Flickers and warblers (the most common being Yellow-rumped, Blackpoll, and Palm) flew by along with Coopers and Sharp-shinned Hawks in hot pursuit. A Red-breasted Nuthatch perched briefly for us and over the bay a few of us got a glimpse of a migrating Common Loon.

We then walked out to the canal and the nearby beach and added our first shorebirds of the tour; a handful of Semipalmated Sandpipers. Higbee Beach WMA is vast, so we drove to the main parking lot and took a short hike to another viewing platform and enjoyed a wonderful morning of songbird migration. In just over an hour, we tallied 33 species including several repeat raptors, our first Red-bellied and Downy Woodpeckers, half a dozen Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and sunlit views of Northern Parula, Palm, and Blackpoll Warblers. The fields



surrounding us were a haven for Swamp, Field, and Song Sparrows although difficult to see. Gray Catbirds, Carolina Wrens, and Northern Mockingbirds seemed ever present.

On the way to Beach Plum Farm for brunch we stopped along the road and witnessed a Common Raven harassing an adult Bald Eagle. Another birder pointed out a large, distant, dark bird that turned out to be the elusive immature Golden Eagle that most of us had missed previously. Once at the beautiful Beach Plum Farm, we enjoyed a nice outdoor farm-fresh brunch in their garden area. A short bird hike afterwards got Joe a lifer Black-and-white Warbler and Loretta spotted a Brown Thrasher. After Beach Plum we went back to the hawkwatch to see what was flying and had 38 species in under ½ hour with 7 Black-crowned Night Herons and a Red-Tailed Hawk newly added to the checklist.

Our first afternoon stop of the day was a 12-mile ride up the Garden State Parkway to the Wetlands Institute in Stone Harbor. Here, the surrounding salt marsh trails and boardwalk added 40 Greater Yellowlegs, a flock of Willet, and several Dunlin to our list. Also present was an immature all white Little Blue Heron and our first Tricolored Heron. We ran into a volunteer Monarch Butterfly tagger and she told us about the project and let Diane happily release one as she wished it a safe journey to Mexico. Rick got a tip from his buddy Todd Pover (who you'll meet later in this report), so we headed to a new location for this tour - North Wildwood at Hereford Inlet. Here, a spit of sand juts out into the inlet where many shorebirds rest and feed. We could view the birds across the inlet from the seawall and let's just say it was a pretty good tip. Counted (with Joe's help of course) were 130 American Oystercatcher, 80 Black-bellied Plovers, 12 Marbled Godwits, 300 Sanderling, and several Caspian and Royal Terns and Short-billed Dowitchers.

After a long and early day, we went back to the hotel for a rest before enjoying dinner at The Blue Pig restaurant in historic Congress Hall. We then had ice cream back in Rick's room while we completed our growing species checklist before turning in for the night.

## **Fri., Oct. 11                      TNC South Cape May Meadows | Bird Banding Program | Salt Marsh Boat Tour | Beach Nesting Birds Presentation**

After another filling breakfast at Ocean View, we headed to The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) South Cape May Meadows preserve and walked the loop trail system there. During our walk we saw a large kettle of Turkey Vultures with some Coopers and Sharp-shinned Hawks mixed in. A flock of 10 White Ibis (now nesting in NJ) flew by along with 15 Black Skimmers. We added a few new birds to our 32 total species, such as a female Common Yellowthroat and a Magnolia Warbler with fall plumage. After the walk, we joined a CMBO bird banding demo led by Dr. David Mizrahi, Vice President of Research and Monitoring for NJ Audubon. It was a busy day



for the banders as they had probably processed over 100 birds in a few hours with the most common being, you guessed it, Yellow-rumped Warblers. During the program we had bird-in-hand looks of Swamp and Song Sparrows, a Yellow-rumped Warbler, and a Gray Catbird.

We then met up with TNC Preserve Manager Damon Noe who gave us a short talk about all the work he and TNC staff do to maintain their several southern NJ preserves. The South Cape May Meadows Preserve underwent a massive restoration project that started after several large storms caused severe flooding in the early 90's. A diverse group of stakeholders, including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, and TNC joined forces to restore the beach, dune and wetland habitat to improve ecosystem functions and habitat quality. Some successful results of the project include increased beach-nesting bird habitat, creation of resting and feeding areas for birds within the wetlands, construction of freshwater ponds behind the dune, and removal of Phragmites, an invasive reed which was limiting habitat for migratory birds. The project was completed in 2007 and restored nearly 460 acres.

After getting sandwiches at the Westside Market and returning to the hotel to dine, we headed for the marina to embark on the Osprey for our tour of the back-bay salt marshes and estuaries of Cape May with Captain Bob Lubberman. The Osprey is a large, enclosed pontoon boat, manned by a very knowledgeable Captain Bob and his naturalist for the day, Miss Patty. Departing the marina, we headed to the mouth of the Cape May Harbor, passing the Cape May Coast Guard Station. Birds were plentiful and provided close viewing opportunities. We observed multiple shorebird species along the jetty leading to the ocean including Ruddy Turnstones, American Oystercatchers, Black-bellied Plovers, Short-billed Dowitchers, Sanderling, and Dunlin. Also on the jetty were several Great Cormorants mixed in with smaller Double-crested Cormorants for a nice comparison. We passed by an old Osprey nest on a tower now taken over by a pair of Bald Eagles and got up close and personal with several Nelson's and Seaside Sparrows as Captain Bob planted the boat right in the salt marsh grass. One of the last birds we spotted was a Common Loon fishing near the boat just molting out of its breeding plumage. We ended up with 37 species of birds during the nearly 3-hour tour.

We were joined at dinner at Bella Vida Garden Café by Todd Pover, Senior Biologist for the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of NJ (CWF). After our meal Todd came back to the hotel and gave us a presentation on New Jersey's endangered and threatened beach nesting birds which consist of: Least Tern, Piping Plover, Black Skimmer, and American Oystercatcher. Todd explained what CWF and their team of biologists and volunteers do to monitor



and protect these birds during the busy spring and summer nesting season when they are competing with people (and their pets and frisbees) for the same resource. Naturalist Journeys makes annual donations to CWF for their help with our tour and for the admirable work they do protecting habitat and conserving at-risk species in NJ.

## **Sat., Oct. 12                      Edwin B. Forsythe NWR | Avalon Sea Watch**

After another early breakfast in our rooms, we headed 40 miles north on the Garden State Parkway to the Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge protects more than 48,000 acres of southern New Jersey coastal habitats. More than 82% of the refuge is wetlands, of which 78% is salt marsh, interspersed with shallow coves and bays. The refuge's location in one of the Atlantic flyway's most active flight paths makes it an important stopover in seasonal bird migration. We left early enough to catch the sunrise on the Garden State Parkway so we made a quick pull over on the shoulder for some photos.

Upon arrival, a short walk in the wooded area by the parking lot gave us many more Yellow-rumped Warblers with some Carolina Chickadees and a Golden-crowned Kinglet mixed in. Cathie spotted a bird perched on the weathervane of the nature center that turned out to be our only Eastern Bluebird of the tour. We then walked the short boardwalk over the marsh near the entrance to the 8-mile drive and not one, but two Clapper Rails made an appearance for us with one taking a bath in the creek in front of us. An Eastern Meadowlark was spotted by Rick in the open marsh and we all got nice scope views of its brilliant yellow chest. We also added a Marsh Wren as we exited the boardwalk. Over at a freshwater pond before our drive around the refuge were a pair of Wood Ducks, with the male's brilliant colors absolutely glowing in the early morning sun, and several other duck species such as teals, Northern Pintails and shovelers. Joe spotted a Wilson's Snipe in flight that some of us got a quick look at.

Some highlights once the 8-mile drive around the refuge began were over 30 Great Egrets, 80+ Greater Yellowlegs (plus one Lesser), Great Blue Herons, Snowy Egrets, American Black Ducks, and a lone Long-billed Dowitcher. A perched Peregrine Falcon on an Osprey nest platform was a nice find and several Northern Harriers and a lone Bald Eagle hunted over the marsh as we drove by. As we exited the wildlife drive into a heavily wooded area, an Eastern Towhee flew across the road, so we parked the vehicles and birded a bit and saw 3 more Towhees, several sparrow species including Savannah, Song, and White-throated, and a very pale looking (perhaps leucistic) Brown Thrasher that we failed to photograph. Our eBird list for the refuge was an impressive 66 species of birds.



We then had a nice seafood lunch at the nearby Oyster Creek Inn, which sits directly on a salt marsh. After lunch we headed south back towards Cape May to the Avalon Sea watch - another one of CMBO's three fall count monitoring programs. In a good year they average 800,000 migrating sea birds in the fall and early winter with the majority being 3 species of scoters (Black, Surf, and White-winged), Common and Red-throated Loons, and Northern Gannets. We arrived in time for a program by one of CMBO's seasonal naturalists who explained how the counters can identify birds over the ocean at a distance, with laminated pictures of the various species represented and their peak migration periods. We then scanned ourselves a bit and were lucky enough to have a large flock of mostly Surf and Black Scoters fly by with one larger White-winged Scoter in the group, giving us all 3 scoters in one field of view. The official counter, Daniel, mentioned there had been a single Purple Sandpiper on the jetty wall mixed in with Sanderlings and Dunlin, so some of us went searching for it and were lucky enough to find and photograph it.

When we got back to the hotel, we had some time off to rest or explore Cape May. Some of the group walked down to the end of Beach Avenue to view the sunset. In October, the beach, directly across the street from our hotel, displays both sunrise and sunset ocean views, a very special thing to experience. We ended the day with our traditional pizza party in Rick's room followed by our species checklist and some ice cream.

## **Sun., Oct. 13                      Sunrise Beach Walk | Hawk ID & Banding Demo | CMP State Park | Cape May National Wildlife Refuge**

We had a busy last full day starting with another optional beach walk. After admiring another colorful fall sunrise and counting a few more scoters, gulls, and terns, we returned to Beach Plum Farm for breakfast. There was a chill in the air but being able to dine outside in the garden and search for birds while you sip your coffee beats eating inside a restaurant. We added no new birds to our list but were impressed when a flock of approximately 50 Blue Jays passed overhead. The rest of the day was spent locally around Cape May with our first stop returning to the CMPSP. There we joined a CMBO hawk ID workshop complete with Lucite cut outs of the main raptor species one would expect to see in migration, followed by a hawk banding program with live birds. A recently banded young male Coopers Hawk and a second-year male Northern Harrier were shown to the group and then released. The harrier even had the banders excited as it is not a species often collected. We then spent some time at the hawkwatch and again walked the boardwalk trail and its 2 ponds, counting 35 species of birds and adding Belted Kingfisher to the list. Then it was on to Two-Mile Landing, home of the Crab House



restaurant for an outdoor seafood lunch on a sunny 75F day on the water. We birded the saltmarsh near the restaurant after lunch and heard a Clapper Rail, spotted a dozen Killdeer, and added a Boat-tailed Grackle.

We had time for one more stop before calling it a day, so the group went to the nearby Cape May National Wildlife Refuge for a beach and maritime forest walk. Diane wanted to visit the gift shop and most of us took home a new t-shirt or other souvenir to support the refuge. When we got to the beach, we found it almost deserted except for a lot of shorebirds (250+ Sanderling, 30+ Black-bellied Plovers, several Dunlin and a few Short-billed Dowitchers) and fishing Osprey. Jim got some nice shots of the shorebirds and Osprey diving into the ocean. On the way back to the cars, we found a few White-throated Sparrows and one Dark-eyed Junco, both recent arrivals to the refuge where they will perhaps spend the winter. We returned to the hotel where most of the group rested while Rick, Joe & Cathie took a short walk to Mt. Vernon Avenue and scanned Cove Pond and then the ocean for one last new bird or two. We were mostly searching for a Northern Gannet which had eluded us all week and were happily rewarded when two of them flew close enough to identify.

Our final dinner was at the Oyster Bay restaurant and Wyatt graciously treated the group to a round of beverages as more delicious seafood was happily consumed. We returned to Rick's room for our final species checklist of the trip ending with a total of 131 bird species either observed or heard. We shared our favorite memories and birds of the trip. Those chosen were Golden-crowned Kinglet, Clapper Rail, Black-and-white Warbler, Brown Creeper, Eurasian Wigeon, Wood Duck, and Osprey. The under-appreciated Yellow-rumped Warbler also got a well-deserved vote from Ken, as other than Tree Swallow it was the most numerous bird of the tour. Favorite memories or places visited was the hawkwatch and CMPSP, seeing all of the Monarch Butterflies migrating south, the Osprey boat trip, the raven chasing the eagle, the Revolution Rail tour, and Edwin B. Forsythe NWR. There was no clear winner, leading me to conclude that a good time was had by all.

## **Mon., Oct. 14                      Homeward Bound**

After loading up the van and enjoying a filling breakfast at Bella Vida Garden Cafe we said goodbye to Wyatt, Ken & Diane and the rest of us headed towards the Philadelphia airport. We had a little time to spare so we took the scenic route along Route 47 with a stop at Jakes Landing Road in the Dennis Creek WMA. We walked the forested road leading to the salt marsh spotting some more kinglets, a Northern House Wren, and a Common Yellowthroat. It was another beautiful sunny day and our final birds of the tour were the local pair of adult Bald Eagles perched together in a dead tree surveying the salt marsh.





We soon reached the airport and train station and said our goodbyes with the hopes of being together soon on another Naturalist Journeys adventure.

*Photos: Group (Rick Weiman - RW), Royal Tern (Jim Betz - JB), Forster's Tern (JB), Greater Yellowlegs (JB), Osprey(Kenneth Cohen - KC), Cape May Lighthouse (Catherine Sandell - CS), Hawkwatch Platform (C), Tricolored Heron (JB), Scenic (KC), Black-crowned night Heron (RW), Great Cormorant in center with Double-crested Cormorants (RW), Nelson's Sparrow (RW), Ruddy Turnstone, Clapper Rail (JB), Dunlin (OR), Sunset (CS), Northern Harrier (JB), Beach Plum farmhouse (CS), Two Sanderlings and a Dunlin (JB), Goldenrod (CS), Yellow-rumped Warbler banding (RW), Purple Sandpiper (RW), Rick & Wyatt (RW), Sunrise (RW), Jakes Landing Road (RW)*